

Last year, through his position on the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees VA funding, Farr authored and promoted legislative language directing the VA to report back to his subcommittee and Congress about the options for establishing a cemetery at Fort Ord. Farr pressed the VA to complete and deliver the report as soon as possible.

"Establishing a veterans cemetery at Fort Ord has been one of my top priorities for several years, and I have been working continually with the VA to meet this goal. This report I ordered makes it clear that pressing forward with a federally funded State cemetery is the quickest road to breaking ground on a cemetery available to our local veterans. I have ensured that the VA will prioritize a State cemetery application for a Fort Ord cemetery and provide federal funding for building costs," said Farr.

"Now that the quickest path to a cemetery is clearly marked, I hope the entire community will join me in pushing for progress in the State cemetery direction. I have already moved forward looking for creative ways to find funds to cover the annual maintenance costs of a State cemetery. I suggested the option of using new or existing funding streams from the Fort Ord Reuse Authority and they deserve credit for considering this option and beginning to analyze the costs involved. By working together at the federal, state, and local government levels, I am confident in our ability to make a veterans cemetery at Ft. Ord a reality."

The report delivered to Farr states in part: "Under current policy, a new national cemetery is not required to meet the burial needs of Fort Ord area veterans...The establishment of a State veterans cemetery is the best alternative to enhance burial service for veterans in the Fort Ord area."

State cemeteries are required to be maintained and operated according to the exact same operational standards and measures of the National Cemetery Administration as National veterans cemeteries.

Full text of the VA report is below.

NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION

Development of a Veterans Cemetery at Fort Ord, California

Reporting Requirement

This paper is being provided in response to the Conference Report accompanying the Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act of 2006. In the Conference Report, the Congress directed that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) examine the potential use of land at Fort Ord, California, for a national cemetery.

Background

One of VA's primary missions is to assure that the burial needs of veterans are met. In support of this mission, VA's goal is to increase service delivery by providing veterans and their families with reasonable access to a burial option (whether for casketed or cremated remains) in a national or state veterans cemetery. In order to measure whether such access is provided, VA uses a 75-mile service area standard based on utilization data that shows more than 80 percent of persons interred in national cemeteries resided within 75 miles of the cemetery at the time of death.

In 2005, 77 percent of veterans were served by a first interment option in a national or state veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their residence. NCA's strategic target is to increase this percentage to 90 percent by 2010.

There are currently two open national cemeteries in the State of California that have both casket and cremation gravesites available: Riverside National Cemetery and San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery. Fort Rosecreans National Cemetery currently has a limited number of cremation gravesites available and is in the process of expanding operations to provide both casket and cremation burial space. Two additional national cemeteries are being developed

near Sacramento and Bakersfield, and a new State veterans cemetery was opened in Redding in 2005. When the sites are opened, approximately 96 percent of California's veterans will reside within 75 miles of one of these six cemeteries.

For nearly two decades, the planning and development of new national cemeteries has been based on demographic studies of the veteran population, as mandated by Congress. Each of these studies identified geographic areas in the United States with the greatest need for burial space for veterans based on concentrations of the veteran population.

Based on the findings in studies conducted in 1987 and 1994, VA has opened nine new national cemeteries (Abraham Lincoln, Dallas-Fort Worth, Fort Sill, Gerald B. H. Solomon Saratoga, Great Lakes, Ohio Western Reserve, San Joaquin Valley, Tahoma, and the National Cemetery of the Alleghenies) and is in the process of establishing three additional national cemeteries near Atlanta, Georgia, South Florida, and Sacramento, California. These three new cemeteries are projected to be open for burial operations before the end of calendar year 2006.

The Future Burial Needs report, completed in 2002 pursuant to a mandate specified in the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, is the third demographic study completed to assist the Department in its long range planning. The Future Burial Needs report provides an assessment, as directed by the statute, of the number of additional cemeteries that would be required to provide a burial option to 90 percent of veterans within 75 miles of their residence beginning in 2005 and projecting out to 2020. In order to meet this 90 percent service level, the report identified 31 locations in the United States with the greatest concentration of veterans whose burial needs will not be served by a veterans cemetery.

In response to the Future Burial Needs report, VA determined that a veteran population threshold of 170,000 within a 75-mile service radius would be appropriate for the establishment of a new national cemetery and would place these cemeteries in locations to provide access to the greatest number of veterans and their families.

Based on the veteran population threshold, revised veteran population estimates from the 2000 U.S. census, the locations recommended by the Future Burial Needs report, and as directed by the National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2003, action is underway to establish six new national cemeteries to serve veterans in the areas of Bakersfield, California; Birmingham, Alabama; Columbia/Greenville, South Carolina; Jacksonville, Florida; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Sarasota, Florida. These cemeteries are expected to begin burial operations in 2009, and will

provide service to about one million veterans.

Discussion

The United States Army base at Fort Ord was closed as recommended by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC). Part of the Base Reuse Plan, developed by the local community without VA involvement, includes building a veterans cemetery, and land has been conveyed to the Fort Ord Reuse Authority (FORA) for that purpose. This land is available for transfer to VA or the State at no cost.

The most recent demographic study, the Future Burial Needs report, did not identify the Fort Ord area as in need of a national cemetery. All veterans in the Fort Ord area are currently served by a burial option within 75 miles of their residence by the San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery, which is projected to have available burial space for full-casket and cremation interments beyond 2030. Establishment of a national cemetery at Fort Ord will not increase the number of veterans served by a burial option.

In addition, while the land may be conveyed to VA at no charge, the range of cost of establishing and operating (for the first year) a national cemetery is between \$16 million and \$25 million. As new national cemeteries open to provide service to veterans and their families, the cost for operations and maintenance will increase significantly to support the increased burial workload and to maintain the appearance of the cemetery as a national shrine.

The veteran population threshold of 170,000 within a 75 mile service area radius for establishing new national cemeteries is consistent with VA and congressional decisions relating to the location of all new national cemeteries constructed over the last 20 years. It allows VA to make the most effective use of limited resources by placing new national cemeteries in locations with the greatest unserved veteran population. It also provides a standard that, when applied across the country, provides a consistent means of measuring proximity to a cemetery.

A new veterans cemetery at Fort Ord would provide greater convenience and easier access to a burial option for local veterans. However, there are other areas of the country that are in a similar situation, in that veterans would prefer to have a cemetery closer to their homes. VA is

sensitive to these concerns, which include the ability of family members to visit a loved one's grave, and the age and mobility of family members.

It is important for VA to review periodically existing policy to identify opportunities to provide better service to all veterans and their families, including those in the area of Fort Ord. Therefore, the Secretary has directed that a program evaluation be conducted to assess the full array of burial benefits and services provided to veterans and their families. As part of this evaluation, VA will examine the current 75 mile service area standard and the 170,000 veteran population threshold to assess how well veterans are being served. Specifically, factors that can impact travel to a national cemetery will be evaluated. Some of these factors are geographic barriers (lakes, mountains, rivers, etc.), and some reflect transportation challenges found in densely populated metropolitan areas, or the absence of public transportation or connecting highway systems that result in extensive driving times to reach the national cemetery. The program evaluation process began in 2005. The findings from this evaluation will be used to update current policy to provide the best possible service to veterans and their families using criteria that can be applied consistently and equitably throughout the country.

A viable alternative to a national cemetery for veterans in the Fort Ord area would be the establishment of a new state veterans cemetery. VA's State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) funds up to 100 percent of the cost of establishing, expanding, or improving state veterans cemeteries, including the acquisition of initial operating equipment. To date, the SCGP has funded the establishment, expansion, or improvement of 63 operational state veterans cemeteries, including a new state veterans cemetery in Redding, which opened in 2005. There is no minimum veteran population threshold for the construction of new state veterans cemeteries.

As evidenced by legislation introduced in the state legislature and letters from veterans, there is high demand for more state veterans cemeteries in California. Based on the experience of other states, Ft. Ord would be an appropriate location for a state cemetery. California, however, has been concerned with the cost of operating state cemeteries and has not submitted pre-applications to establish any state cemeteries other than the newly opened cemetery in Redding. Various options have been considered to reduce or relieve some of the financial burden on the state, such as the creation of a private foundation that would accept the responsibility for the expense of maintenance and general upkeep of the cemetery.

Summary

New national cemetery construction is not based on the availability of land, but on need. All

veterans living in the area of Fort Ord are served by a burial option at San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery. Under current policy, a new national cemetery is not required to meet the burial needs of Fort Ord area veterans.

A program evaluation is being conducted to assess and update the criteria used to determine the need for new national cemeteries. Any changes to the criteria must continue to be applied consistently and equitably to serve all veterans throughout the country.

The establishment of a State veterans cemetery is the best alternative to enhance burial service for veterans in the Fort Ord area. The VA will continue to work in partnership with the State of California to explore this option.